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‘Race’ and the Rooney Rule

For a small and fortunate minority, football—by which I, as a UK scholar, mean soccer—is a vehicle for social mobility and, in some cases, celebrity. Black players in professional UK football leagues have been through significant periods of racist exclusions and acceptance. Many would argue that the latter is still inconsistent and conditional upon ethnicity and which team or nation they represent. Others espouse the popular view that racism is much less problematic than it used to be and that football’s meritocracy helps find and promote the best players from the grassroots to the global stage. Yet when the issue of the dearth of Black *managers* becomes the subject of conversation, there is a distinct lack of clarity. Why do so few Black players progress into substantive leadership roles after their playing careers end?

The League Managers Association believes that, to improve the potential for Black managers to match their numbers as players, they must counter institutional racism and stereotypes about Black managers, the lack of transparency in recruitment processes, and “old boy” networks. Approximately 25% of footballers since 1992-3 have been Black and minority ethnic yet only 4.4% have taken on leadership roles as coaches or managers in the profession. In 2014, there were only two Black managers in English football. Professional Football Association Chief Executive [Gordon Taylor](#) said there was a “hidden resistance” to hiring Black managers and that steps needed to be taken to improve.

Even when potential Black managers have been qualified they have still been overlooked for interviews at professional clubs. This hints at the complexities of racism as individual and institutional manifestations lead to a variety of incomprehensible outcomes. If the meritocratic mantra is that the best person will always get the job, it seems stereotypes of intellect and physicality constrain opportunities for Black players, following them into and even keeping them out of management application processes. As Sue Bridgewater writes, “Whilst considerable progress has been made in eradicating racism from football’s terraces, there is concern football management may be a new glass ceiling which must be broken through.”

One of the highest profile initiatives to improve the diversity of managers in professional football and to capture the imagination is the “Rooney Rule”. The Rooney Rule has shown positive results in the United States’ National Football League (NFL) and has now found some traction in the UK. By requiring teams to interview Black and minoritised ethnic candidates for head coaching and senior football operation jobs, the Rule is intended to enhance diversity and equal opportunities in senior hiring practices. The English Football League plans to implement the Rooney Rule in its 2016-17 season, having established that quotas

and unlawful “positive discrimination” will not be allowed in its enforcement. And yet, experienced professionals still misunderstand the nature of the Rooney Rule, mistaking it for a quota system. For example, the multiple Champions League winning manager of Manchester United, [Jose Mourinho](#), argues that there is no need for the Rooney Rule, “merit” is more important than “the colour of skin.” Sure, in an ideal world. But Mourinho’s position invalidates experiences of racism, “hidden resistance” to hiring Black managers, and the available statistics. When he says “There is no racism in football. If you are good, you are good. If you are good, you get the job,” Mourinho ignores the institutionalised racism in football even he has witnessed on the pitch. [Keith Curle](#), one of the few Black managers to beat the odds, agrees with Mourinho. When it comes to the ideal of Black player progression into management, football managers who have uncritically benefited from traditional hiring practices are not necessarily the most authoritative starting points for action.

By adopting the position that “merit” might be ignored, opponents of the Rooney Rule form a backlash to the pursuit of racial equality. When conventional networks are extended to include non-traditional recruits, then ideas of merit, qualification, and experience become more conspicuous and formalized. That is, focusing on the most qualified person rising to the top only seems to become dominant rhetoric when the traditional, “old boy” networks are threatened. The use of merit as the only criteria for inclusion into football’s leadership hierarchy can ignore the historical exclusion of Black individuals and their support networks in the past, as well as how the past has affected the merit people in the pipeline can display—if Black players are not promoted into management, they cannot get management experience and be chosen for higher level jobs. Sommerlad describe this as the “social magic” of merit, suggesting some form of personal and professional neutrality, even when the opposite is more likely given previous conscious or unconscious biases.

I propose that the Rooney Rule goes some way to address “unconscious” or implicit biases. Challenging the racism of recruitment to leadership roles by forcing clubs to interview a Black candidate when appointing to a substantive post is an important, and public, step. Whether it will go far enough to combat the racial biases of influential decision-makers and hiring committees, of course, remains to be seen.